

Train Station of the Afterlife

by Alayna Juneau

"Jason?" a lady says, snapping her fingers in my face. One of the billions of souls that passed me on the way to catch their train. "Jason? Is that you?" The woman's shrill voice is too much to ignore.

"Please miss, go and catch your train," I move my hand in a shooing motion. I'd rather just sit here for a millennium or two more. That would be better than making a decision.

She grabs my hand, "Your father wandered away, and I can't seem to find him."

Her eyebrows lift in concern. All her wrinkles work to create an exaggerated expression, almost as if she were on a show that teaches toddlers their emotions. I sigh and look over to the lady. "If I help you, will you please leave me be?"

She loops her arm through mine and pulls me to my feet. Her other hand clutches the cross hanging around her neck, "I've been looking around for ages. My feet are killing me."

She must be looking for the Heaven train. I wonder if Jason's father is there waiting on her. Not that it really matters. Most souls as confused as her have been wandering around for years.

"I'm glad you decided to stop daydreaming and help your old mother," she says with a smile.

I take her through the train station, past hundreds of other souls waiting to catch their train. We pass by a small office with a dusty 'help wanted' sign.

"Who would want to work here?" the lady says.

"I'm not sure anyone works here," I say. I haven't seen anyone for as long as I've been sitting, but truth be told, I haven't exactly been looking.

The gold trim on the pearly white train catches my eye as we board the platform. "Are we going on a trip?" the lady asks, her eyes sparkling in the light from the train. The platform is covered in people. A young girl clutches the hand of a young woman. A kid is holding the leash of a golden retriever. A man stands on the platform with olive skin and shoulder length brown hair. The old lady catches sight of him and drops my arm. The doors to the train open and the crowd boards together. Not a single person pushes or rushes. Everyone smiles at each other. The young help the old. The whole scene radiates happily ever after.

When the last passenger boards, the olive-skinned man, who I can now see wears a conductor's outfit, looks at me and smiles. He raises an eyebrow and gestures toward the train, as if asking if I'm going to board. I shake my head and he shrugs. As the train pulls away, the whistle blows.

It's better to go back to my seat and think about my decision more. I can't choose Heaven. An eternity of bliss sounds great at first, but after a few eons of the same thing over and over again, I know it'll become boring. If there is never bad, how can you appreciate the good?

My shoulder crashes into another soul, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." He's a young man, not more than 18 years.

His shirt is a multitude of different colors, like a rainbow. He stands without lifting his head.

"Hey, I didn't mean to..." he doesn't finish his sentence. He walks around me into a small hallway that leads to stairs, and I follow. The stairs are damp and slimy, letting out onto a dark, crowded platform with no seats. Some souls sit on the stairs with their heads in their hands.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"Hell," an old man says, putting his arm around my shoulders. He's wearing a conductor's outfit like the olive-skinned man, but his looks torn and old. "Or the train to it anyway. Are you lost, pretty boy?"

I look over to the kid in the rainbow shirt. "No, I don't think so." Why would you choose to spend forever in hell? "Oh? Looking to save a soul?" he laughs. It's a high scratchy sound.

I shake his arm off and walk to the kid. I sit down on the dirty floor beside him.

"You can't change my mind," he says.

"About?" I ask, folding my hands in my lap so they won't touch the disgusting floor.

"I belong here," he says.

"I'm not here to change your mind," I say, "I'm just deciding on which train I should take."

"If you aren't here to stop me, then leave me alone," he says and pulls his knees up to his chest.

"I just came from the train to Heaven. It was a little bright for my tastes," I say and look over at him. He puts his head between his knees with a sigh. "But you know, with Heaven being so high up in the clouds it must be cold. Right? So I decided to check out a place a little bit warmer."

I watch through a break in his arms as the kid's face moves up a little. I know he cracked a smile. "So, tell me, before I make a permanent decision, why did you choose to go to Hell?"

The kid's smile vanishes, and he lifts his head to meet my eyes, "It's where they told me I deserved to go."

There is a deep ache in my chest. For the first time since being dead, I've felt the absence of my vital organs.

"They?" an old man asks as he hobbles over to join the conversation. "There's only one rule in this old train station: you can't let anyone else choose your eternity. Hell is all about guilt. Whatever guilt you harbored in life brought you down here in death. Sometimes people mistake their own guilt for the guilt of others."

"You can't just drop a feeling you've had for your whole life," the kid says.

"Not all at once; it'll take some time to learn to accept yourself," I say.

"And you can't do it down here in this shitty place, go upstairs and get some sunlight," the old man says. The boy nods and starts to stand up.

I lead him back up the stairs and into the train station's brightly lit halls. I pull him along until I find the biggest windows I can and sit him in the sun. His cheeks turn rosy, and he smiles.

"Thank you," he says.

I leave him to think and try to do some thinking myself. I should try to stop putting off my choice and just choose an afterlife already. Heaven will get boring. I don't harbor any guilt for hell. There are so many other choices, I can't remember them all. I look at the closest map and notice a small bald girl also studying the map.

"Do you need help?" I ask.

"I'm not allowed to talk to strangers," she says and looks away.

"Okay," I say, and continue to study the map.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch her looking at me a few more times before she says, "What's your name?"

I can't quite remember what I was called on Earth. How very strange it is to not remember your own name. What had that woman called me earlier? "You can call me Jason. What's yours?"

"Emma," she says then crosses her arms. "Now we aren't strangers."

"I guess that's true," I say.

"Can you read that map?" she asks quickly.

"Yes, do you need to get somewhere?" I ask.

"Yes, Mommy said that one day I'll go to sleep, and when I wake up, she probably won't be there," she says as her small hands bunch up her dress and her face turns a light shade of pink.

"Mommy said that I could be anything that I wanted. I want to be a wildflower."

"Then you should go to Reincarnation," I say, pointing to the signs hanging from the ceiling. "There are signs."

She motions for me to bend over and whispers in my ear, "I can't read."

"Do you want some help getting there?" I ask.

"Yes please!" she says.

"You know I haven't chosen which train I want to get on yet." We start walking toward Reincarnation's train, and I ask the girl, "Why did you choose to be a wildflower?"

"They can grow wherever they want!" she says with a twirl, "And they are always beautiful."

"To be honest, I'm a little scared to choose a place to go," I say.

"Every time I had to take a shot, Mommy would grab my hand," she grabs my hand, "and told me to be brave. So you just have to be brave and take your shot."

We make it to the train just before it pulls out. There is every kind of animal painted on its sides along with plants and trees and even humans that look like they are dancing.

Emma's face spreads into a big smile, but she turns and grabs my hand again right before she steps onto the train. "Mommy always told me it was important to keep yourself the happiest, and your choices should always make you happy, so wherever you go, make sure it makes you happy."

The train starts to pull away, and she heads into the car. Okay, it's time. I should make a decision. Why not the Reincarnation train? I'm already here. No. No. I may not remember much of my life, but the last time I was on Earth it was pretty bad, it can only be worse now. What about the train to Nothing? That just feels like giving up. And there's that 'help wanted' sign again.

Wait.

I grab the sign and blow off the dust. Maybe I'm not ready to make a choice. Maybe I should stay right here and help others. I slowly open the office door and step inside.